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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SY
SUBJECT: RIAD SEIF DETAILS FUTURE POLITICAL PLANS, ASKS FOR
QUIET USG SUPPORT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Former MP and recently released Damascus Spring detainee Riad Seif laid out for the Charge d'Affaires January 24 his vision for a new, broad-based democratic party, noting that it would aim to delegitimize the SARG and bring a message of reform and democracy to the Syrian people.

He asked for quiet USG support in providing and disseminating information about the sins of the regime, as well as messages via diplomatic channels, in coordination with European allies, expressing support for those like Seif, undertaking peaceful reform activities, as a means to forestall action against them. Seif provided a three-page list in Arabic of suggested USG actions that will help increase pressure on the regime. Post is translating the document and will report on its contents January 25. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C): Former MP and recently released Damascus Spring detainee Riad Seif met with Charge d'Affaires and PolChief on January 24. Seif, who was released on January 18 along with four fellow Damascus Spring political prisoners, greeted the visitors with compliments about the U.S., calling it as &the best nation in the world& and expressing his desire to help correct Syrians, mistaken anti-Americanism, which the SARG has fueled. He characterized his release as a surprise and "a mistake" committed by the SARG which they would later regret, asserting that it was a condition set by the Arab Lawyers Union as a condition for the group to hold its assembly here last week.

¶3. (C): SEIF'S VIEW: DEMOCRACY WITH SYRIAN VALUES: Seif noted that the post-WWII Western democratic experience serves as a model to him, but noted that each country must have its own version of democracy. He pointed to the Spanish model as one which was particularly appropriate for Syria, based on their experiences of democratic transition following the end of Franco's long-term, authoritarian regime. He stressed that a successful Syrian democracy would be based on Syrian values and culture, which share common points regardless of religion. However, it would not make use of hyphenated democracies diluted by Marxist, Nasserist, or Islamist ideology.

¶4. (C): PLANS TO LAUNCH NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY: Seif then laid out his plans to establish a new political party in the next few weeks. Seif emphasized that the party will be broad-based to a degree that will allow both secularists and conservative Muslims into the big tent. The party will focus first on making clear to Syrians the utterly corrupt, "counterfeit" nature of the SARG. Seif stressed that while the party will be democratic, he will not use terms like &secular& or &liberal&, characterizing both terms as

alienating to religious Syrians who might otherwise share similar political goals. Seif feels his image as a clean, uncorrupted politician and his position as a Sunni Damascene businessman make him and his party attractive to average Syrians. Seif noted that since his release, he has received visitors from the entire Syrian political spectrum, including visits by both liberal and conservative senior Muslim sheikhs. He also noted that approximately one year ago, an envoy of Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Sadreddin Bayanouni had visited him in prison, expressing support for Seif if he were to establish a conservative party.

¶15. (C): PARTY STRUCTURE TO INCLUDE FOUR OTHER DAMASCUS SPRING DETAINEES(: Seif then sketched out the structure of the party, noting that he considers Arif Dalilah, the still-detained Damascus Spring dissident, to be his closest ally. Seif noted that he would begin shortly a campaign calling for Dalilah's release, using him as a rallying point to attack the regime. Seif also emphasized a future role for Habib Issa who, like Dalilah, is Alawite. Seif noted that Walid al-Buni and Fawaz Tello will also be founding members of the party. In addition to these five founders, Seif added that there will be another hundred founding members, representing all classes, religions, and ethnicities in Syria. Seif noted a key condition for membership was "reliability", meaning that in a party based on values, regime members or other Ba'athists or those who have profited from corruption are not welcome. The "antireligious" will also not be included. (NOTE: Seif made clear that he is a "believing" Muslim, but secular in orientation and non-practicing.)

¶16. (C): BUT WILL EXCLUDE HOMSI, FAYYAD, AND GHADRY: Seif also made clear which opposition figures are not welcome in the party. While considering him a friend, Seif ruled out a future partnership with fellow former MP and released

detainee Mamoun al-Homsy, whom he said had made millions in smuggling prior to his arrest. (Note: Other contacts say that it was widely known that among his other business practices, Homsy smuggled drugs.) He noted that the SARG had linked their names together effectively as a means of tainting Seif's reputation. In passing, he also noted that Homsy was a very simple, near-illiterate man with no political vision. Seif also singled out intellectual gadfly Nabil Fayyad, calling him a double agent and remarking that Fayyad had played "a dirty game" with Kamal Labwani. Seif told Charge d'Affaires that during Fayyad's courtesy call this week, he had, in front of witnesses, very clearly informed Fayyad that there was no basis for cooperation and that it was their last meeting, hoping this would pre-empt any attempts by Fayyad to claim a relationship. Seif also said Farid Ghadry is unwelcome, based on Ghadry's lack of connection to Syria and his father's reputation as corrupt.

¶17. (C): "LABWANI MADE MANY MISTAKES": Seif discussed his relationship with fellow dissident Kamal Labwani. He noted that he was very fond of Labwani and had worked closely with him in the past. Seif expressed reservations, however, about Labwani's aggressive secularism, which has alienated many religious Syrians. He briefly discussed Labwani's actions, saying that Labwani had not been careful and had made mistakes. Seif saluted Labwani's commitment to the Syrian people and his sense of pride at what he thought he had accomplished for them in the U.S., but noted that Labwani had provoked the government by taunting the regime to arrest him upon his return to Syria. He said that Labwani's clearly pro-American public stance had hurt him and that he would probably be the last of the prisoners to be released.

¶18. (C): SEIF REQUESTS U.S. SUPPORT IN DELEGITIMIZING SARG: Seif's requests for USG assistance focused on the USG providing and helping disseminate information about SARG corruption as the core tool for delegitimizing the government. He suggested that the USG could help facilitate contacts with U.S.-based institutions that could provide information about SARG's corrupt activities. He also asked that the USG pressure the SARG via discreet channels and in

coordination with European countries to release Dalilah and not to re-arrest Seif or arrest his colleagues or party activists. Seif noted that he would be willing to participate in an opposition conference in Europe, but expressed concern about whether or not he will be allowed to leave or return to the country.

19. (C): COMMENT: Seif appeared healthy and confident, and made his case in solid, if not perfect English. (His daughter has told us that he is suffering heart problems, however, and needs medical attention abroad.) He made clear that he believed his imprisonment had strengthened him politically and personally and that since the SARG had ruined him financially, it had lost a weapon to use against him. (He said he has family members and private supporters helping support him financially.) He seems to have relatively clear ideas about how he wants to organize politically, and also recognizes the risks, making repeated references to the likelihood that he might be re-arrested or even killed. Seif was vague and uncertain about what kind of USG support would be most helpful, perhaps indicating that his thoughts on this subject, just one week after his release, have not yet become clear. Seif expressed reservations about the value of strong public statements of support for his upcoming political efforts, since they have a tendency to make the SARG nervous and likely to lash out at the movement.

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